A

LETTER

TO THE

CAPUT

OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

A LETTER TO THE CAPUT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE ON THE REJECTION OF THE GRACE FOR ABOLISHING SUBSCRIPTION.

By a MEMBER of the SENATE.

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THE public have been informed, by an article † at the head of the University news, in the Cambridge Chronicle of the 15th of December last, that the CAPUT, by a despotic exertion of an arbitrary power, vested in them in dark and arbitrary times, rejected at the last congregation the Grace, which was proposed for the removal of subscription to the 39 articles, at the time of taking the degree of Bachelor in Arts, without even giving any reason for such their rejection.

SURELY, the respectability of the gentleman by whom the Grace was presented, as well as a becoming deference for a learned, liberal, enlightened body of men, to whose suffrage at least the question ought, in

† The article in the Cambridge Paper, to which we here allude, was as follows; "Cambridge Dec. 14. On Tuesday the 11th inst. a Grace *for the removal of subscription to the usual form at the time of taking the degree of Bachelor in Arts*, was presented by the Rev. Dr. Edwards to the CAPUT, which was rejected without assigning any reason for this exertion of their power. The members of the Caput for the present year are Dr. Farmer, as Vice-chancellor, Dr. Turner, Dr. Jowett, Dr. Glynn, Mr. Coulthurst, and Mr. Wade."

in common decency, to have been ſubmitted, might have led us to expect, that ſome excuſe would have been made, or ſome reaſon aſſigned for ſuch an obnoxious ſtretch of ariſtocratic power, to palliate, in ſome degree, the extreme odium of ſo offenſive, and unpopular a meaſure.

A DARK and ſilent conduct is always a ſuſpicious one. Mental reſervations are preſumptive marks of a jeſuitical diſpoſition. I know, however, that there are ſome men in the world, who, to their ſhame, boaſt, that they make it a rule not to give their reaſons upon diſputable points, becauſe thoſe reaſons may, ſometimes, ſerve to furniſh their opponents with arguments and objections, and ſo arm them againſt themſelves. Truth and a good cauſe need no ſuch ſubterfuges. With reſpect to a man of this futile, evaſive, temporizing ſpirit, it is my fervent prayer that I may never be ſo unfortunate as to take ſuch a one for my friend — *Hic niger eſt, hunc tu, Romane, caveto.* Generoſity and magnanimity can never dwell in the narrow ſoul of ſuch a character. It is a certain ſign of a timid, artful, puſillanimous diſpoſition of mind. Reaſon, juſtice, equity, and truth, with her open face, are ever forward to meet the light — *becauſe their deeds are not evil.*

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The people of England have been told, by the firſt of ſtateſmen, that there is a ſecret power behind the throne, which is greater than even majeſty itſelf. And, may not there be an inviſible influence behind the Caput of the univerſity of Cambridge, whoſe energy is more powerful than the Caput itſelf? If the object of the Grace be a matter of a queſtionable nature, and, that it is ſo, no one, who remembers the noble ſupport it met with ſome years ago in the parliament of Great Britain, can poſſibly deny, why not ſubmit it to the good ſenſe and free vote of the ſenate? Was the Caput afraid from a conſciouſneſs of the badneſs of their cauſe, to truſt it to ſuch an iſſue? The preſumption is againſt them, ſince truth has nothing to fear from a fair and open diſcuſſion; but falſehood has. For, when we heſitate to enter into the merits of a caſe, which from the magic influence of ſecret motives we are diſpoſed to countenance; when we evaſively decline the free and open inveſtigation of a ſubject, which the cenſorious may ſay is connected with our preſent intereſts or future proſpects, the ſuſpicion with a diſcerning, impartial public, will be, that ſuch an equivocal conduct implies a conviction, in our own minds, that the cauſe will not bear inquiry.

These are not times for a junto of men to

exert prerogative or exercise monopolies of power either in the cloister or at court. Cannot the wisdom of the senate of the university of Cambridge be trusted with the discussion of a question, which intimately concerns every individual in it, as well as the senate of the nation, can be entrusted with matters, that concern the state? The wise man tells us, that *in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*; but as the Caput of the university have by their conduct declared, that they are no friends to free inquiry, but that they rather wish to fetter the scriptures, and discourage the use of bible-maxims, and doctrines, which may not always sit easy on tender consciences, they reverse the proverb of the sacred moralist, and place it in a few. And why, I would ask, may not six men, invested with the regalia of office, and armed with the insolence of a Stuart's power, be wiser, at least in their own opinions, than six hundred of those untitled, unpensioned masters of arts, who are devoid of such self-ennobling appendages?

It may be said, that the Caput is possessed of an absolute power, with respect to the admission or rejection of all Graces offered to the senate, and that for their conduct upon such occasions they are amenable to none; but, in these times, it might perhaps be more discreet, as well as more modest,

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to ſuffer that power, like many old laws, precedents, and cuſtoms, to lie dormant*. What ſhould we think, for inſtance, of an individual member of the ſenate, who, punctiliouſly inſiſting on the right of prerogative, ſhould pertinaciouſly ſtop the degrees of all thoſe inceptors in arts, who had accidentally omitted to call upon him at the time of incepting, and thereby cruelly deprive them of their emoluments in the univerſity? When we ſee two or three men in the Caput, for it cannot be ſuppoſed in theſe caſes that the ſix are all unanimous, ſetting up their judgment in oppoſition to the whole body of the univerſity, and withholding from the maſters of

* According to the eſtabliſhed principles of the Engliſh conſtitution, every bill, which has paſſed the two houſes of parliament, muſt receive the ſanction of the royal aſſent, before it can regularly paſs into a law; and yet, it is not now to be expected, that any bill will ever be negatived by the ſupreme branch of the legiſlature, which has met with the joint concurrence of the lords and commons. The king, no doubt, is poſſeſſed of an abſolute, unlimited power, with reſpect to making peace or declaring war, diſſolving his parliament or calling a new one, whenever and however he ſhall pleaſe; but, the moderation and practice of the preſent times, as well as the fatal experience of the evil conſequences, which we have ſeen attendant upon an arbitrary extenſion of royal prerogative, particularly, in that critical period of our hiſtory, when one of the tyrant Stuarts, for attempting to deſtroy the equilibrium of the conſtitution, was, by a formal proceſs, brought to the block, are ſufficient to convince us, that we have now nothing to fear from the unreaſonable exertion of a delegated power, though veſted in the hands of majeſty itſelf. See De Lolme.

of arts a queſtion, the merits of which they are deemed incompetent to examine; are we not neceſſarily led, either to pity the incapacity of the many, or to ſmile at the ſelf-importance of the few?

But, is not this tacit imputation of incompetency in the body of the ſenate an open inſult to the underſtanding of every member of it? Is it not to deprive us, in a wanton and tyrannical manner, of the opportunity of exerciſing our legal right of ſuffrage? If thoſe members of the Caput, who oppoſed the admiſſion of the Grace, objected to it from fair and reaſonable motives, let them ſtand forward and avow their reaſons like men. They cannot but be ſenſible that their arbitrary manner of ſtopping it in the Caput, to prevent it from being voted by the ſenate, was an act of deſpotiſm, extremely unpopular in theſe days, both in the univerſity and in the world; and therefore, I hope they will think with me, that ſome juſtification of their conduct is neceſſary.

That an independent member of the ſenate has a right to call upon the Caput, for an explanation of their proceedings, cannot be doubted, when it is conſidered that the perſons who compoſe that body, are as much the official ſervants of the univerſity,

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as the miniſter of the day, and other officers of the crown are the ſervants of the public, at whoſe bar they ſtand amenable for their political conduct.

It is in vain for them to attempt to ſhelter themſelves under the banner of prerogative, or the legal right of exerciſing the privilege of office, for we know, that *ſummum jus eſt ſumma injuria.* There are, in the academical, as well as in the national code, many precedents and ſtatutes now exiſting, which no one pretends to regard, or conſider as models for future proceedings. Being truly abſurd and contemptible in themſelves, they are deſervedly become obſolete, and ought as ſuch to be eraſed and forgotten, ſince, they will ever remain a diſgrace to the ſtatute book, ſo long as they ſtand recorded in the volume of our Engliſh laws. As an inſtance of the ridiculous antiquated ſtatutes, here alluded to, I need only to mention the law, whereby it is enacted, that if a man deny the truth of a certain abſurd, tritheiſtic, idolatrous doctrine, which has no foundation whatever in the holy ſcriptures, he ſhall be condemned to have his noſe ſlit, his ears cut off, to be expoſed in the pillory to a bigoted rabble, and afterwards impriſoned for life! Thanks to the clemency of theſe liberal, enlightened times, more than to the mercy of intolerant, ignorant individuals! In theſe halcyon days of civil and religious liberty,

berty, there is no danger that this law ſhould ever be put in force.

Under the circumſtances in which I ſtand, as poſſeſſing an independent vote, I cannot but expreſs an indignant ſenſe of the indecency, not to ſay inſolence, of an act of deſpotiſm, whereby a queſtion of acknowledged magnitude, which was ſo ably argued ſome years ago in the Houſe of Commons, but forcibly borne down by the miniſterial influence of the man, who loſt America, has been prevented from coming before the ſenate of the univerſity of Cambridge. The ſuſpicion, which ſuch a conduct obviouſly implies and naturally ſuggeſts, would juſtify the ſevereſt cenſure. Either the ſenate was competent to judge of it, or it was not. If a conviction of the impropriety, or bad tendency of the Grace, determined the Caput to ſuppreſs it, this muſt have proceeded from a ſecret ſuſpicion, that it would be dangerous to leave it to the free deciſion of the voters, whom conſequently they muſt, of neceſſity, have ſuppoſed to be deficient either in wiſdom to ſee, or integrity to reſiſt the evil.

But perhaps it might be ſuſpected, that the maſters, having had an opportunity of examining the doctrines which they ſubſcribed for their firſt degree in arts, and being convinced of the unreaſonableneſs

ſonableneſs and injuſtice of impoſing on ſtudents a religious teſt, the nature of which they have never been able to ſtudy, and therefore cannot poſſibly be ſuppoſed to underſtand, would be diſpoſed to do to others that juſtice, by aboliſhing ſubſcription at the time of taking degrees, which had been heretofore refuſed to themſelves*. Poſſibly upon this preſumption, the queſtion might be withheld from the cognizance and ſuffrage of the voters, by our ſharp-ſighted, wary, all-provident ſuperiors. But we truſt, from

* The glorious ſtruggle for that ſacred privilege of religious liberty, by which Chriſt has made us free, exerted with ſo much ſpirit in the beginning of the year 1772, by the petitioning clergy; the very able and honourable ſupport, which the cauſe of conſcience, truth, and virtue, met with upon that occaſion, in the Houſe of Commons; as well as the general diſpoſition to afford the deſired relief, which diſcovered itſelf among all moderate, thinking men, throughout the kingdom, had ſo far attracted the attention of the public to the conduct of the Heads of the Univerſity of Cambridge, which hitherto, in its general character, has ſtood unrivalled among the ſeminaries of Europe for liberality of ſentiment, that the enemies of religious liberty and free inquiry, being aſhamed to appear any longer to oppoſe a reform, ſo reaſonable and juſt, adopted, for the ſake of political convenience, the following plauſible expedient, by which it was thought that, without at all relaxing the chains of mental ſlavery, or in reality abating any thing of the impoſing ſpirit of exacting a ſubſcription to human formularies, they might obtain a reputation for candour and moderation, and thereby ſave their credit with the world. "The ſubſcription required of candidates for the degree of bachelor of arts in the Univerſity of Cambridge, has been altered in its form, but not relaxed in its ſpirit or import. By a grace, which paſſed the ſenate the 23d of June 1772, the following ſubſcription is required; *I* A. B. *do declare, that I am bona fide a member of the church of England, as by law eſtabliſhed.*"

See Jebb's Works. Vol. I. p. 194. Stat. Acad. p. 436.

from the good ſenſe of mankind, and honeſt ſpirit of ingenuous youth, that all ſuch efforts, to ſuppreſs inquiry and ſtifle truth, will be fruitleſs and vain; *magna eſt veritas et prævalebit.* The ſons of *Alma Mater*, the diſciples of the immortal *Newton*, are not to be diſcouraged in their ſcientific reſearches, whether theological or philoſophical, by ſuch contrivances, as might well ſuit the framers of an *index expurgatorius*, calculated for the meridian of Rome.

The papiſts, to maintain, under the pretence of preſerving the unity of the church, a ſpiritual tyranny over the minds and conſciences of men, forbid the laity the uſe of the ſcriptures; but ſuch prohibition, far from anſwering the purpoſe, for which it was intended, ſerved only to accelerate the progreſs of the reformation. A dark, myſterious conduct is peculiarly calculated to raiſe curioſity, and excite a ſpirit of inquiry, which ſtimulates the inquiſitive to examine into thoſe doctrines, that ſo cautiouſly ſhun the light. This, it may reaſonably be expected, will be the natural effect of the Caput's caution and reſerve, in arbitrarily ſuppreſſing the late Grace. For, it can only ſerve to raiſe a bold ſpirit of inquiry in the minds of the ſtudents, who will now be more anxious than ever to look into the principles and foundation of thoſe ſecret, myſterious doctrines, as they are popiſhly called, which our ſpiritual

ritual rulers, at the very time when they impoſe them, carefully withhold from our view, by wrapping them up in the dark impenetrable veil of all-concealing *myſtery*.

It is well known, that the improved good ſenſe of the clergy of the church of England has, of late, led them to depart entirely from the doctrines of the articles and homilies; and that they, diſregarding the ſyſtems, gloſſes, and interpretations of men, attend chiefly to the ſcriptures alone. They have now, for the moſt part, wiſely adopted a ſtyle of moral preaching, with a view to reform the manners and amend the heart. This appears from the ſermons, diſcourſes and tracts, that have been publiſhed in the courſe of the laſt hundred years, which, for ſolidity and ſtrength of argument, are unequalled by any compoſitions of the kind in Europe; and, which are all chiefly calculated to enforce the practical precepts of the goſpel, to encourage the cultivation of perſonal holineſs, and to promote the ſubſtantial virtues of a good life. This, no doubt, muſt be the aim and end of all true religion.

But, the eſtabliſhed clergy, inſtead of meeting with that univerſal approbation and praiſe, which their good ſenſe deſerves, are ſeverely reproached for this conduct by the Calviniſts, Methodiſts, Mo-

ravians, and other ſectaries of the like ſtamp. They are ſeverely accuſed of departing from the articles, which they ſubſcribed when they entered into orders, and which, by their conformity, they ſtill, to *appearance* at leaſt, profeſs to believe. The charge of inconſiſtency is brought againſt them on this ground, that, while by their compliance and profeſſion they countenance the eſtabliſhed doctrines of the church, they preach only chriſtian morality, and not the ſyſtematic doctrines of the thirty-nine articles, which muſt be allowed to be the real and true doctrines of the reformation.

The truth, however, is, that the articles were framed by men, who had juſt emerged from popery, and who, being heated with the flame of controverſy, were conſequently driven by an intemperate zeal into oppoſite extremes. Inſtances of this may be ſeen, in the hiſtory and origin of the abſurd doctrines of *abſolute decrees, predeſtination, election, reprobation, ſalvation by faith alone without works, vicarious ſufferings, imputed righteouſneſs* and others of the like kind, which were ſtrenuouſly maintained by the firſt reformers, with a view to obviate ſome peculiar doctrines and tenets of the church of Rome, particularly as to the article of works; all which, however, according to the ſenſe in which they are uſually underſtood, are found upon

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a more accurate inveſtigation of the oriental, figurative phraſeology of the ſacred writers, to be as contrary to ſcripture, as they are to reaſon and common ſenſe.

If our religion lie in the Bible, as every proteſtant muſt allow, why ſhould we not be content to make that ſacred volume alone, the rule and ſtandard of our faith? To the Bible we are all of us moſt ready to ſubſcribe: but as to the thirty-nine articles, they are nothing more than the doctrines and commandments of fallible men like ourſelves; they form no part whatever of the word of God. The perſons, who framed them, were under the ſtrong prejudices, peculiar to the temper and circumſtances of the times, in which they lived; and, therefore, muſt, merely on that account, be particularly liable to fall into miſtaken notions, in matters of religion: unleſs, indeed, we are willing to allow them the prerogative of *infallibility*, a privilege which none but the Roman pontif was ever yet hardy enough to claim.

Literature, from its being much encouraged, has made a very rapid progreſs ſince the time when the articles were firſt made; and, the many eminent ſcholars, who have ariſen during the laſt two hundred years, have carried it to an extent, unknown before. The ſcriptures, therefore, having been more

more ſtudied, are now better underſtood. Poſſeſſing many literary advantages, which our forefathers did not enjoy, and availing ourſelves of their labour and improvements, we have diſcovered, that not only the ſyſtem of Calvin, but ſeveral other inconſiſtent doctrines, which during the midnight darkneſs of the middle ages had crept into the church, are by no means founded in truth. The articles of the church of England were compiled chiefly upon the calviniſtic plan, which was the favourite theology of thoſe times; but now, after a more critical examination of the ſacred writings, they have been found not only to be inconſiſtent with, but contrary to, the word of God. They have, therefore, deſervedly fallen into diſuſe, not to ſay contempt, among men of ſenſe, and are now conſidered only as *obſolete ordinances*, which are ſubſcribed merely as an antiquated form.

It ſhould be conſidered, however, that, as this ſubſcription, though now regarded only as a mere matter of form, is inſidiouſly calculated to inſnare unthinking youth, leads to acts of deliberate perjury, and is in itſelf, excluſive of the reproaches, to which it daily expoſes us, of ſecularity, inconſiſtency, and duplicity; a moſt ſerious and alarming evil!

When

When we look back to the noble efforts, ſo truly honourable to a proteſtant clergy, which were exerted in the year 1772, in petitioning parliament for redreſs, in the matter of ſubſcription to the liturgy, and thirty-nine articles of the church of England; when we recollect the very active part, which the gentlemen of the univerſity of Cambridge took in promoting, and bringing forward the petition, by which they manifeſted to the world their integrity, liberality and good ſenſe; when we remember, with heart-felt gratitude, the ſupport and encouragement, which the petition met with in the Houſe of Commons, from ſome of the moſt diſtinguiſhed characters in the kingdom, who were ſenſible of the hardſhip of our ſituation, and willing to afford us relief; it muſt be matter of grief and wonder to every lover of true religion, that, although the ſubject of civil and religious liberty has been much canvaſſed, ſince that time, and was never, perhaps, better underſtood, in this kingdom, than it is at preſent, yet nothing has been done, for theſe fifteen years, towards carrying on, and perfecting the good work.

What muſt the public think of the rejection of the late Grace by the Caput, without their vouchſafing to aſſign the reaſon of ſuch conduct, for the ſatisfaction of the ſenate? How inconſiſtent

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muſt it appear in us, to refuſe to exonerate the ſtudents from a burden in the univerſity, which we ourſelves petitioned to be relieved from in the ſtate? How unworthy of us is it, to impoſe a yoke on the necks of our brethren, which neither we, nor our forefathers were able to bear, when by our chartered rights we are inveſted with a power of redreſſing our fellow ſufferers within our own walls, by aboliſhing ſubſcription to a religious teſt at the time of taking degrees? Attainments in philoſophy and literary merit, not the watchword of a party, or ſibboleth of a faction, were intended to be the proper qualifications, that ſhould entitle candidates to thoſe honours, which the univerſity beſtows, as rewards of ſcience, to repay the learned labours of her ſons.

Surely, thus to fetter learning with the ſhackles of the barbarous, ſcholaſtic divinity of the thirty-nine articles; to damp a ſpirit of free inquiry in religious matters by clogging ſacred literature with human incumbrances; to preſcribe thoſe ſame articles as a ſtandard of goſpel truths; to propoſe them as a ſcale or model by which we are to meaſure, to eſtimate, and to regulate the doctrines of the ſcriptures, is highly diſgraceful and abſurd in the firſt ſeminary in Europe, which has a Bacon and a Newton to boaſt of, thoſe ever-memorable founders of

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a more wiſe and ſober method of philoſophiſing, than what the world had ever known before; it is, too, to the laſt degree inconſiſtent with the eſtabliſhed plan and principles of education in an univerſity, in which the whole ſyſtem of academical inſtruction has, for many years, been moſt ſucceſſfully directed to the examination, purſuit, and diſcovery of truth.

But, the ſtudents of the univerſity of Cambridge, exerciſed daily in the ſcience of accurate inveſtigation, and accuſtomed from their firſt entering upon a courſe of academical learning, *to take nothing upon truſt*, are not to be diſcouraged, from the divine purſuit of truth, by the difficulties and ſtumbling blocks, which the bigotry or prejudice of the narrow-minded few may throw in their way. Are the ſcriptures and word of God to be the rule of our faith, or the doctrines and commandments of men? If the premiſes be clear, if the concluſions be fairly drawn, the ſacred regard which we owe to truth lays us at all times under an indiſpenſible obligation to yield a willing aſſent to the reſult of our inquiries, whatever it be. On this principle alone, we may ſafely truſt God with the conſequences of his own doctrines, how contrary ſoever, upon a fair deduction, they may be

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found to be to our private prejudices and preconceived opinions.

Let it be remembered, then, as well by the friends, as by the enemies of free inquiry, that a spark of truth, in spite of all the efforts of the world to extinguish or suppress it, will one day break out into a flame; and that, though other builders have heaped rubbish, wood, hay, and stubble upon the solid foundation of christianity, laid by the great master builders, Christ and the apostles; yet, if there be any truth in prophecy and divine revelation, a time will come, when their works, which they have built, shall be tried by fire; then the Articles, Doctrines, Systems and Bodies of human divinity, accumulated, heaps upon heaps, like mountains upon mountains in the fabled pile, by which the poets tell us, the giants of old attempted to scale heaven, shall all be burnt up, *and like the baseless fabric of a vision leave not a wreck behind*; but, after this conflagration and general overthrow, the sterling gold of the everlasting gospel, thus cleansed and purified, from all filth and dross, by the refining fire, *shall shine more and more unto the perfect day.*

In the excellent words of that amiable, learned, and ever-honoured christian, Dr. James Foster, which indeed are worthy to be written in letters of gold,

I take

I take my leave of you with expreſſing his fervent prayer, as the moſt ardent wiſh of my heart; *May a manly and chriſtian ſpirit of free inquiry be every where encouraged and honoured; and may all the attempts of weak and ignorant, or of intereſted and deſigning men, to corrupt true religion, and load it with incredible doctrines, diſhonourable to the attributes and perfections of God, be fully detected, expoſed, and done away.*

A MEMBER of the Senate.